

The role of description

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Abstract

Description plays an indispensable role in social science narratives. Though often described as “merely” a tool for generating or testing causal claims, description is valuable on its own terms. Description “tells it how it is”, but “telling it” can also affect “how it is”. Thus, description is consequential not only for what it *reveals* but also for charting a narrative that finds logic in cacophony – that *creates* common sense. In what follows, I provide an overview of description and how it varies, and then introduce best practices through which researchers can generate understandings around issues, attentive to both their revelatory and creative possibilities. I end by considering dilemmas associated with description.

Keywords: description, common sense, narrative, creativity

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Introduction

Looking at the world often reveals patterns that are surprising to the conventional wisdom. Take Anne-Marie Slaughter's description of global governance.¹ While theorists bemoaned the lack of global governance, looking for it as had been conventionally understood in agreements or treaties among states, she examined what was unfolding around particular issues on the ground. In the wake of 9/11, for instance, she saw collaboration in networks of financial regulators, law enforcement officials, and intelligence operatives. Describing their efforts demonstrated a different pattern of governance. Global governance was there, Slaughter's description demonstrated, just not where scholars were looking. John Ruggie's depiction of the interaction between companies and civil society actors around the UN Global Compact and HIV/AIDS treatment programs similarly both revealed something that was there – actors and practices many scholars were not examining – and generated a different way to think about them – not as “private” actors but as participants in what he called a new public domain.² Peter Andreas' description of the siege of Sarajevo made legible the business of survival in war. His description allowed for a new appreciation of the interrelation between licit and illicit activities and the dark side of globalization that has become a critical area of research.³

These highly influential arguments did not grow out of law-like claims about the relationship between a and b, but out of descriptions of patterns they see in the world. They told it like it was. Though description is often maligned in political science and journals regularly profess reluctance to publish “merely” descriptive work⁴, description plays a vital role in

¹ Slaughter 2004.

² Ruggie 2002.

³ Andreas 2011.

⁴ Gerring 2012, pp. 729-730.

noticing problems with established theories, generating theoretical advances, and shaping the world that we see.

So, what are descriptive arguments? How does description contribute to political analysis? What makes these, and other descriptive arguments like them, persuasive or good? How can new researchers practice good description?

An Overview of Description

Many analyses of description contrast it with explanation. In a thoughtful example of this, John Gerring explains that it is primarily about the question a researcher is asking. Description “aims to answer *what* questions (e.g., *when, whom, out of what, in what manner*) about a phenomenon or a set of phenomena”.⁵ Gerring claims that description is interested in the *who, what, when, where, and how* questions associated with good journalism. Description can focus on particular individual accounts, but it can also aim toward indicators that allow one to generalize, associations that one claims among different dimensions of a phenomenon, syntheses, and typologies.⁶ Gerring contrasts this with the *why* questions that animate causal accounts. He claims that these should be understood as different forms of argumentation.⁷

In some instances that may be true – understanding what Jan 6 was (a protest, an insurrection, or a self-coup?), who participated (right wing militants? white supremacists? Trump supporters?), and how it happened (spontaneous or planned violence) entail descriptive analysis. Understanding why it happened (the product of democratic backsliding? factionalization? the politics of resentment?) is a causal story⁸ Barbara Walter’s recent book, though, titled *How Civil*

⁵ Gerring 2012, p. 722.

⁶ See Gerring 2012, p. 725.

⁷ Gerring 2012, p. 724.

⁸ Walter 2022.

Wars Start, is very much a causal story. There is a lot of “why” behind the “how”. Similarly, to justify describing Jan 6 as a self-coup, Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze use claims about why it occurred – often the product of democratic backsliding – to appropriately categorize it.⁹ In practice, the lines between description and explanation are not clear; there is often explanatory logic behind description and description in explanation – the why and the how are intertwined.

Even though the distinction between explanation and description is not always clear, Gerring’s overarching claim that description is important on its own terms remains important. As he puts it, describing only in the quest for causal inference will leave us with less knowledge and knowledge that is “less, precise, less reliable, and perhaps subject to systematic bias”.¹⁰ Focusing on *what* questions, even if they cannot be entirely separated from *why*, primes scholars to understanding more about social and political interactions. This generates greater openness to seeing the patterns that disrupt conventional wisdom – be they relations among sub-state governors, business and civil society organizations, or smugglers and peacekeepers. Noticing new patterns can also foster creative ways to think about them. Attention to description on its own terms helps scholars guard against trapping themselves in models that are inadequate for solving problems in the world.

How description is understood and practiced varies with the analysts epistemological and methodological commitments. By its very nature, though, description is creative and thus promises to shape the world it describes.

Positivist or not?

Gerring’s argument is speaking to the social science mainstream, animated by positivist notions of truth. In this logic, it is common to aim descriptive accounts toward unbiased or

⁹ Pion-Berlin, Bruneau, and Goetze 2022.

¹⁰ Gerring 2012, p. 733.

neutral facts.¹¹ These facts are useful for uncovering systematic categories or general universal relationships. There is a truth “out there” and it is the job of social scientists to uncover it, get it right, and reveal the general patterns it can elucidate. Take the Correlates of War (COW) as an example. Like many data projects, it defined a phenomenon, war, and specified variables related to it to make possible the systematic study of war over space and time.¹² Its categories, including national capability, alliances, geography, polarity, status, and battle deaths represent the dominant views about war and its causes in the 1970s.¹³ According to this project, World War I is a “war” with over nine million battle deaths and involving nine countries divided between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey) and the Allies (France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and, later, the United States).

Feminist, constructivist, critical, and pragmatic approaches, on the other hand, are skeptical of claims about the neutrality or universality of facts. These approaches encourage attention to less visible “whos” or “whats” and claim that different vantage points generate different stories about what happened. For instance, enterprises such as the COW are embedded in a canon dominated by white male leaders from western imperial powers.¹⁴ How might the view change if one considered the views of more peripheral subjects? For one, it might disrupt the logic of looking at WWI through the lens of countries. Looking at US behavior through the eyes of black intellectuals in the US, for instance, tells us that the US decision to enter WWI was not only action to protect US interests, or the Allies, but also an effort to preserve white hegemony within the US as well as abroad.¹⁵ Similarly, women from many different countries

¹¹ King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, p. 56-59

¹² <https://correlatesofwar.org/>.

¹³ <https://correlatesofwar.org/history>

¹⁴ Shilliam 2021, pp. 15-18.

¹⁵ Vitalis 2015, p. 1-2.

worked to promote peace against what Jane Addams called “a tribal form of patriotism”.¹⁶

Lauren Wilcox demonstrates that counting battle deaths is only one of many ways to think of the interaction between bodies and violence.¹⁷ Rather than aiming to account for facts “out there”, these approaches urge awareness of how “facts” and their worthiness for study are influenced by one’s perspective. Differently situated people may see and experience phenomena in different ways. By attending to whose perspective is included (or not) one might get a very different narrative.

Thick or thin?

Description can be thin or thick. Thin description is sometimes described as superficial.¹⁸ Related to positivist assumptions, it is often informed by “facts” and established theoretical categories about who and what matter. It asks questions about when and where events happened to infer general patterns. The answers to these questions are often assumed to hold regardless of place or time. Many data projects, such as the COW mentioned above, are aimed at this type of description. Important insights can be generated from this kind of inquiry. Using the COW data, for instance, John Vasquez has argued that power politics behavior does not avoid war, but brings states close to it.¹⁹

Thick description, on the other hand, explores the underlying meanings that make sense to participants. It is more sensitive to history, culture, and practices that allow particular understandings. As put by Clifford Geertz “it is not in our interest to bleach human behavior of the very properties that interest us before we begin to examine it.”²⁰ This perspective has us pay

¹⁶ Tickner and True 2018; Addams 1907, p. 216 (cited in Tickner and True).

¹⁷ Wilcox 2014.

¹⁸ Holloway 1997, p. 154.

¹⁹ Vasquez 2011.

²⁰ Geertz 1973, p. 17.

great attention to *how* questions. From this view, describing the World War I case that went into the COW dataset requires that we go beyond thinking of it as “a war” by virtue of its what it was (a violent interaction resulting in a specified number of “battle deaths”) and who was involved (nation states). We could consider it instead as a particularly tragic conflict – a war no one wanted that nonetheless caused unfathomable devastation.²¹ We could also find important the individual plotting related to failed diplomacy, and beliefs about the advantage of the offensive that shaped strategies of the protagonists, the erosion of civilian control, and brinksmanship.²² All of this is important to understanding how this particular set of events unfolded. Thick description and thin description tell us different things about similar events.

Description’s Creative and Normative Side

Description is often contrasted not just with explanation but also with experimental approaches (that intervene to create a treatment) or normative accounts (that tell how things *should* happen).²³ But description does not merely represent, accurately or not, what has “happened”. The act of describing also shapes how we think about what has happened.²⁴ It can make even those involved in a process see themselves, their roles, or others differently than they did as things were happening. Vitalis argues, for instance that international relations scholars in the US in the middle of the 20th century actively constructed a narrative of states, the logic of state power in the state system, and the scientific study of both to obscure the concerns with race and race subjugation that drove policy earlier in the century.²⁵ Fortna used sophisticated statistical methods to generate a description of peacekeeping that attended to the relative

²¹ Tuchman 1962.

²² Tuchman 1962; Van Evera 1984; Snyder 1984.

²³ It is not always clear that the separation is tenable (Hollis and Smith 1990).

²⁴ Latour 2005.

²⁵ Vitalis 2015, 1.

difficulty of various violent situations. This new description generated a different picture of peacekeepers' impact.²⁶ Autesserre's portrayal of peace challenges the dominant scholarly view of what peace and how it unfolds.²⁷ Description is creative. Through talk we make vivid something about social interaction. Our language not only reflects but also shapes the facts we see.

The act of describing also centers narratives, people, and understandings that reflect values and impact power dynamics. Many traditional theories in the political science canon reproduce western dominance and white privilege, obscure the role of women, and are built on logics that emphasize masculine and belittle feminine traits.²⁸ Describing what is obvious and taking commonsense categories as given reinforces dominant values. Efforts to unsettle these accounts are often more self-conscious of their normative frame and seek to dislodge rather than reinforce dominant values. Both, though, have potential normative impact.

As is likely clear by now, my own style is skeptical of positivist claims, I often endeavor to describe in a thicker manner, and I am attentive to the creative and normative impact of my work. Regardless of whether your orientation is similar or different to mine, though, there are some agreed on best practices for good description. Below I explain strategies that help generate persuasive description regardless of your ontological, epistemological, or methodological style.

Doing Good Description

Ask who, what, when, where, and how questions. Even though it is not always possible to separate why questions from who, what, when, where, and how, Gerring's suggestion is a good place to start. Examine things that actually happened. Who did what? Anne-Marie Slaughter

²⁶ Fortna 2004.

²⁷ Autesserre 2021.

²⁸ Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2014; Zvobgo and Loken 2020; Shilliam 2021; Elstain 1981; Tickner 2001, Parashar, et. al. 2018,

examined actual government officials, from police investigators to financial regulators to judges and legislators and what they were doing: exchanging information and coordinating activity across national borders. This activity is how they worked to tackle crime, terrorism, and a variety of other international problems. Her description was important in and of itself, but also became the basis for a causal argument about how networks or substate officials could be an additional, and sometimes more effective source of global governance.

Acknowledging your assumptions. What you set out to describe is inevitably informed by the categories in your mind. Rather than ignoring this, or assuming your mind is just like everyone else's, good description often follows when the author is aware of their frame of reference. A descriptive account that makes clear its starting point and associated expectations is better poised to notice anomalies. What is leading you to look at an instance – what do you anticipate seeing? Who do you expect to act? What do you think will happen? When? Where? How do you think things will unfold? Thinking through what you expect, and making your implicit assumptions explicit, allows you to separate your expectations from your observations. Gelman and Basbøll argue that stories are most likely to be impactful when they represent aspects of life that are not explained by existing models.²⁹ This is what Dewey argued was the difference between blind reacting and a scientific method.³⁰ It allows you to learn – to generate new concepts or new ways to think about old concepts.

Consider Stathis Kalyvas's description of the Greek Civil War. Clarifying commonly held assumptions about war that were based around macro accounts, including the those coded by the COW, allowed him to notice activity in the Greek Civil War that contested them.³¹ This

²⁹ Gelman and Basbøll 2014.

³⁰ Dewey 1916, p. 210.

³¹ Kalyvas 2009.

ultimately led him describe individual, more micro, rationales for violence that many had ignored. His insight generated a different description of the Greek Civil War than was commonly accepted. By self-consciously unsettling the macro-narratives researchers had taken for granted, Kalyvas's argument influenced a wide array of research looking at micro-dynamics in violent encounters. This has included investigations around popular participation in violence, more or less productive peacebuilding practices, and even how non-violent activities might affect the dynamics of violence.³² His new assumptions were also fundamental for building a causal argument about violence related to territorial control but his careful unveiling and disruption of common assumptions was, arguably, even more important for generating important new thinking – descriptive and causal – about the world.

Look broadly at your phenomena. What is happening all around the issue you care about? How does it look in specific instances? What is the general texture of political and social relations around your concern? As King, Keohane, and Verba recount, Richard Fenno's deep study – often referred to as “soaking and poking” – of Congress and the behavior of congressmembers allowed American politics researchers to frame better questions.³³ In Gerring's words, “if an evidence-gathering mission is conceptualized as descriptive rather than causal (which is to say, no single causal theory guides the research), it is more likely to produce a broad range of evidence that will be applicable to a broad range of questions, both descriptive and causal.”³⁴ Descriptive efforts require knowledge that allows the analyst to paint a vivid picture for the reader. They thus do not shy away from complexity and detail.

³² Fujii 2009, 2021; Autesserre 2014; Avant, et. al. 2019.

³³ King, Keohane, and Verba 1994, p. 38.

³⁴ Gerring 2012, p.734.

Specific techniques might include reading histories and memoirs, looking at documents, and scouring secondary sources. There are many other ways to gather data, including ethnography, field research, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Creating timelines and knowing the actors involved can be important. Establishing coding rules, exploring content analysis or using factor analysis can also play roles in descriptive efforts. Persuasive descriptive accounts often rely on a combination of these to bring the story to life and demonstrate its integrity. Being able to write a good description commonly requires the author to know a tremendous amount of background information and context, much more than they will ever fit in the pages of their work.

Conveying deep knowledge about a specific instance or a phenomenon over space and can help convince others of the value of their account. Extensive knowledge of the issues he addressed and ability to explain who was doing what, when, and how were key to much of John Ruggie's work from his analysis of embedded liberalism as an ordering principle, to the disjuncture between the study and practice of international organizations, to his argument about new public actors in global governance.³⁵ This deep exploration can also result in fruitful pathways you may not have expected. Ayse Zarakol stumbled upon the story of Ibn Battuta as she was reading widely to gather context and texture as she began work on what became *Before the West*. She hadn't expected to write about him but realized that "this is a person like me". Even though he lived in the 13th century, the degree to which his life paralleled the life of an academic in the 21st century was a vivid illustration of just how connected the world had been much earlier than we commonly assume.³⁶

³⁵ Ruggie 1982; Ruggie and Kratochwil 1986; Ruggie 2004, respectively.

³⁶ <https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/before-the-west-w-ayse-zarakol/?s=09>

Among the most prominent and purposeful examples of the connection between broad understanding and fruitful description can be found in feminist international relations. Consider Cynthia Enloe's *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*.³⁷ Even her early work on ethnicity's role in the military and police reveals curiosity about what she was seeing on the ground and how it mattered to different people, including women. Centering women's experiences led her to describe military bases in much greater detail than had been the case before. Rather than seeing them only as a strategic decision with impacts on the sovereignty of the host, she described them as larger phenomena, with impacts on the shape of local economies, race relations, crime, the lives of sex workers, and more. Enloe's work demonstrates the worth of exploration. Looking beyond the strategic decisions of states and the associated view of the world that highlights masculine elements of the human condition, led Enloe to attend to a more holistic view that incorporates feminine features as well.³⁸ In so doing, it she practiced good description and also generated considerable theoretical insights.

Compare. Structured, focused comparison can be its own method, but it also can be useful in generating a narrative.³⁹ Comparing what you think of as similar instances can push you to discover important detail and to check your narrative. If a comparison with apparently similar instance reveals different processes, it can sharpen one's description of by alerting one to what is not happening and thus enhancing attention to paths not taken. As Keck and Sikkink recount in their preface, "Why did this event [a military slaughter of student demonstrators in Mexico], a 1968 version of China's 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, not inspire an international response?"⁴⁰ Thinking through the two events side by side generated attention to a set of actors

³⁷ Enloe 1990.

³⁸ Tickner 2001; Parashar et. al 2018.

³⁹ George and Bennett 2004.

⁴⁰ Keck and Sikkink 1998, p. ix.

many might have ignored in Tiananmen Square – transnational networks. A comparative frame led to both better (more detailed, complex, and compelling) description of the Tiananmen Square incident as well as new causal hypotheses. Subsequent analysis generated an explanation of how these networks could both elevate human rights consciousness globally and restrict the ability of governments to suppress information. Noticing similarities among what are assumed to be different situations can also be productive. Susan Sell and Aseem Prakash found similarities in the strategies of what were assumed to be very different actions, businesses and NGOs.⁴¹ This led them to examine each side by side, which again led to better description that detailed normative claims by business and material concerns among NGOs, and also a novel explanation.

Take account of “inconvenient facts”. Related, is Max Weber’s observation that a key criterion for the scientific vocation is its willingness to take account of “inconvenient facts”. “Inconvenient facts” are specifics that go against one’s personal or political views. Weber wrote about inconvenient facts in his essay on science as a vocation as fundamental to the academic enterprise.⁴² Unlike the politician whose inner conviction is so strong that nothing can shake it, persons of knowledge aim for understanding that accounts for inconvenient facts.⁴³ Being able to hold support for the importance of United Nations activities in Sarajevo while still acknowledging that they were not possible without black markets as Peter Andreas did is one example. Different epistemological positions do this in different ways. Those assuming the potential for objectivity endeavor to keep themselves at a distance. Those skeptical of objectivity strive to make their positionality clear. Awareness of one’s positionality and the epistemology (and related values) that drive one’s account portends a kind of distance not completely unlike

⁴¹ Sell and Prakash 2004.

⁴² Weber 1919, p. 22.

⁴³ Strong 1985.

efforts to be objective in more positivist traditions. Both stances encourage an openness to evidence – even evidence that is uncomfortable.

Take note of your subjects' views. Researchers are well served by attending to how descriptions are understood by research subjects. Latour urged following the actors and charting their experience as it made sense to them as the best that scholars could do.⁴⁴ Even if one is working toward systematic and universal statements, though, checking how these statements resonate with those involved gives researchers critical information. The use of focus groups to design improved survey questions is one example of this insight in practice.⁴⁵ Another is knowing the actors involved, reading memoirs or other firsthand accounts and conducting interviews. These can all help you understand how those you are researching understood what unfolded. How one does this should be attentive to various pitfalls. Research subjects can outright lie or strategically construe their experiences to use scholarship as an instrument in constructing a narrative that they see as beneficial. Participants can also recount what they think researchers want to hear rather than explaining how they actually saw things as they lived through events.⁴⁶

Triangulate among perspectives. Triangulation can be important for ferreting out lies or strategic constructions. Even if they are being honest, though, participants in the same interaction often see things differently. Triangulating among perspectives and tools can thus also be useful for gaining a more complete picture – including one that recognizes how participants experienced the same event differently.⁴⁷ Dancing between participant views and theoretical, or other “outsider” perspectives (such as those encouraged by a positivist perspective) can also

⁴⁴ Latour 2005.

⁴⁵ O'Brien 1993.

⁴⁶ Parkinson 2021.

⁴⁷ Latour 2005.

generate important descriptive understandings. Playing back events to those who participated can engender new angles that, if they resonate, generate creative insights. I experienced this personally as I tried to make sense of the Swiss Initiative's (a non-profit association) impact on private security governance. The meetings leading to the Montreux Document gained acceptance, in part, due to the assertion that they would simply take stock of existing arrangements and introduce "nothing new". But by pulling the private military and security industry into international humanitarian and human rights law, the process, in fact, created new norms for the industry. Based on interviews and participant observation, I depicted events in ways that participants saw as accurate. But by situating these in a pragmatic argument, I highlighted the creative new practices that had developed even as participants claimed they were doing nothing new. My description shifted the way some involved in the process thought about both their past interactions and potential for future governance in this arena.⁴⁸

Be open to surprise. Its tendency to notice phenomena that are surprising is a critical part of what makes description so important for both understanding the world and contributing to theories about it. Martha Finnemore's experience provides a useful example here. Curious about the increasing talk of "humanitarian" intervention in the 1990s, Finnemore set a research assistant on the task of reading history on past interventions and how they were justified. The very astute research assistant returned interventions in the mid-20th century and the early 20th century and even the late 19th century but as he got further back in time, he found no more talk of interventions.⁴⁹ Instead, he reported, people spoke not of intervention but of war. A more positivist research strategy might have led a research assistant to define "interventions" in an

⁴⁸ Avant 2016.

⁴⁹ Andreas Katsouris is now Senior Vice President of Global Services at Aristotle International.

abstract way as a particular sort of violent phenomena no matter how participants spoke of them. Acknowledging the meaning participants assigned to the phenomena, though, led Finnemore to describe intervention as historically bound – and with meaning that has shifted over time with changes in international society.⁵⁰ Different traditions place various value on definitions that are stable across time versus those more open to participant meaning, but all gain from being open to the potential that data can produce surprises.

Be clear about how you came to your description. What did you do to acquire the information in your description? What did you read? Who did you survey or interview? What did you ask them? Were you a participant observer? How did you collect that data in your data sets (and from what sources)? Transparency about what led you to your description is important for replicability, critique, and complementary innovation.

Dilemmas in Description

Inferring from the above, good description asks questions beyond why. It focuses on events that happened, acknowledges its assumptions, looks broadly at phenomena, takes account of inconvenient facts, takes note of its subject's views, triangulates among perspectives, is open to surprise, and is clear about how it went about creating a narrative that is vivid and compelling. It is not, however, without dilemmas.

Striking a balance between persuasiveness and humility is the first. The notion that description simply “tells it like it is” implies certainty about a range of “facts”. The importance Gelman and Basbøll attach to a story's immutability implies a search for clarity and certainty.⁵¹ And yet there is more and more evidence that connection and turbulence in the contemporary world – and many claim historically as well – generates a level of deep uncertainty that is rarely

⁵⁰ Finnemore 2003.

⁵¹ Gelman and Basbøll 2014.

overcome.⁵² How to craft descriptions that are persuasive and useful but also open to correction and resistant to misplaced certainty is a critical dilemma. Scholars are often driven to cast their arguments as more certain than they are to convince a skeptical field that “merely” descriptive work is nonetheless valuable. But such efforts can stymie creativity among academics, policy practitioners, and citizens.

A related second dilemma surrounds the potential for self-fulfilling prophecies. If our descriptions also shape the social world, there is the possibility that describing dangers can make them more likely. Concerns in the wake of the Jan 6, 2021 U.S. insurrection are a case in point. Describing events in the US with reference to various established arguments about the potential for civil war have led Walter and others to raise flags about the risk the US faces.⁵³ Others, though, have pointed to the way in which talking about the risks could actually inflame them.⁵⁴ Similar concerns have been leveled in the past about claims of inevitable war – which played into arguments about the cult of the offensive that some claim made WWI more likely.⁵⁵

In sum, description both reveals and creates. It is critical to assessing and producing theory, and it helps us make sense of the world around us. Though it is hard to separate from explanatory accounts in practice, valuing description on its own can generate appreciation of the complexity and detail that often encourages creativity. The good descriptive practices described above are applicable across epistemological perspectives and can be important for understanding, explaining, and shaping social interactions.

Recommended readings

⁵² Kay and King, forthcoming; Katzenstein and Seybert 2018.

⁵³ Walter 2022.

⁵⁴ O’Toole 2022.

⁵⁵ Van Evera 1984; Snyder 1984.

Gerring, John. 2012. Mere Description. *British Journal of Political Science* 42. 721-746. A good overview of description and the value of thinking of it on its own. Though pitched to a positivist audience, its analysis is useful beyond that.

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Shilliam, Robbie. 2021. *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press. An astute analysis of how Western and colonial assumptions shape a good portion of “normal” political science and what can be gained by attending to a broader array of experiences.

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